

Gadamer and Sartre on Self-Transformation

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The critique of traditional Western philosophy by existentialist philosophers in the name of finitude confronted those philosophers, as well as those who accepted their critique, with the question of the future of philosophy itself. Against the assumption of an unsituated thinking, of a mind powerful enough to rise above time and place as to be able to pronounce an unconditional truth, existentialism revealed a subject bound to body, perspective, locale, and thoroughly temporal/historical. Gadamer's hermeneutic thinking was offered as a reply to the question of philosophy's future under the terms of finitude. While I think that the later works of many existentialist philosophers exhibit strong hermeneutic tendencies, it was surely Gadamer's work on hermeneutics that significantly posed it to the philosophical public as a way to reconfigure (without rejecting) under the sign of finitude such traditional notions as truth, universality, meaning, and subjectivity. And freedom also, for as he so forcefully put it, "no higher principle is thinkable."¹ Gadamer's hermeneutics can well be read as a philosophy of freedom, and it is here that his work bears on the existentialist project in an interesting and important way. Yet, at the same time, I think that Gadamer misses an important facet of such an existentialist understanding of freedom as that of Sartre. The theme of self-transformation appears in the works of both of these thinkers and offers an opportunity for critical comparison.

"The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside of it," Gadamer tells us. One "belongs" to a situation in such deep ways for Gadamer that it marks him as leaning closer to a social constructionist than to a substantialist version of the subject. This is particularly clear in his critique of Descartes whose "characterization of consciousness as self-consciousness continued to provide the background of modern thought."² "We can," according to Gadamer, "only think in a language." Language is not a tool externally related to its user, but rather "we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own" (*PH*, 62). Indeed, "learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us" (*PH*, 63). It is impossible, on Gadamerian terms, to separate interior self and external world as in the Cartesian project. The critique of modern subjectivity is extended by Gadamer, beyond the "substantialism" of Descartes, to the transcendentalism of Husserl's phenomenology. The question, indeed the enigma, of Husserl's phenomenology for Gadamer is how there can possibly be a "science" of the lifeworld, for this would imply that a conscious subject that belongs to its lifeworld can transcend it to the point of complete objectification: "the difficulty consists in the fact that the universal horizon of the lifeworld also necessarily embraces transcendental subjectivity" (*PH*, 190). It is clear that for Gadamer, Husserl has only a weak sense of "belonging" to a lifeworld, one that allows an unrealistic transference from particular to universal:

Even if we realize all those things, and consider that, like myself, every I has the possibility of freely deciding to adopt the change of attitude involved in the *epoche* and to investigate this transcendental *a priori* of correlations—and that transcendental subjectivity permits and even demands a transcendental community—we still cannot escape the paradox that the world-constitutive subjectivity, though it may be a manifold of such constitutive subjectivities, is a part of the world constituted by those subjectivities and therefore brings into play all the special subjective, relative characters of the personal horizon that distinguishes the Negroes of the Congo or Chinese farmers, for example, from Professor Husserl. In light of the unsuspendably specific character of the pregiven horizons of the lifeworld, how is phenomenology as a “rigorous science” possible at all (*PH*, 191–2)?

The notion of “unsuspendably specific” horizon expresses well Gadamer’s commitment to finitude: “Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of ‘horizon.’ The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular perspective.”³ The horizon consists of the means of making anything intelligible, and those “means” are historical/cultural. While language is central, “language” means not the formal rules and structures comprising semiotics, but rather a form of life. “Reason,” Gadamer tells us, “exists for us only in concrete, historical terms” (*TM*, 276). This means that individual subjectivity, hermeneutically speaking, makes sense of life experience in terms of historically developed (and developing) “categories” that form the capacity of understanding. As sedimented, these historical/cultural/linguistic means of understanding form one’s “prejudices” in approaching anything to be understood. These conditions of finite understanding cannot be suspended or bracketed to make way for an Husserlian transcendental consciousness. For Gadamer, prejudices do not impede, but rather make possible, the understanding of phenomena. Gadamer’s sense of “belonging,” then, with its emphasis upon horizon, language, history, and prejudices carries on the existentialist commitment to finitude.

Gadamer’s hermeneutical sense of understanding also carries with it a hermeneutical sense of freedom. While finite subjectivity always already stands within a form of life, with its horizontal categories of understanding, all horizons are mobile. “Prejudices” are not fixed essences, but have only sedimented being and, as such, are open to change. “The prejudgments that lead my preunderstanding are also constantly at stake right up to the moment of their surrender—which surrender could also be called a *transformation*” (*PH*, 38; emphasis added). While individual subjectivity is always already formed in an historical/cultural lifeworld (a tradition), individual subjectivity can “further determine” that lifeworld (*TM*, 293). This can happen because of the shock of the new, the strange, the other, through which our familiar categories of understanding are “disturbed,” which in turn can lead to a revision of the way that one views oneself and the world. This means that one’s “identity” is always at risk due to what Gadamer calls “the untiring power of

experience" (PH, 38). Experience, for a finite subjectivity, is a constant challenge to one's sedimented categories of meaning. Gadamer likens "the experience of daily life" to that of experience in "scientific procedure" (TM, 350) wherein new data put a continuous pressure on a scientific sedimentation such as a hypothesis or law. Just so, in the "experience of daily life," new experience puts to the test one's contingently formed categories of meaning. Under the sign of finitude, there is inevitably a "fundamental openness of experience to new experience" (TM, 353), and in this hermeneutical way of saying it, individuals are always (existentially) open to the possible, and thus to self-transformation.

The notion of "belongingness" in this account differs from that of "openness" insofar as the former is a matter of sheer facticity. One simply, as a subject, comes to be a subject in a historical community, formed by the language, narratives, and other categories of meaning peculiar to that community. In fact, one's prejudices are so fundamentally formative as to have, for the most part, an unconscious existence. However, one does not seem to be "open" to new experience in the same way as one belongs to and is formed by a community. In fact, when thematizing openness, Gadamer often switches his analogy from the role of experience in scientific procedure to holding a conversation. In conversing, "listening" is distinguished from "hearing" in the sense that one can have an excellent perception of sounds without really listening to the other. "Anyone," Gadamer says, "who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond" (TM, 361). Around listening a whole vocabulary of openness is established that is carried over into any new experience whatsoever: one must "allow oneself" (TM, 367) to follow what the other says; there must be a "readiness for experience" (TM, 362); with regard to a text, one must be "prepared for it to tell [one] something" (TM, 269); one must be "sensitive to the text's alterity" (TM, 267); again, with regard to the text, and the other person, "all that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text (TM, 268). In a footnote Gadamer cautions the reader concerning the constant "danger of 'appropriating' the other person in one's own understanding and thereby failing to recognize his or her otherness" (TM, 299). This vocabulary indicates that, before the alterity of new experience can affect or "disturb" our categories of meaning, one must dispose oneself to be affected by new experience.

It is, I believe, in this context that one must understand Gadamer's well known reference to "good will" in the so-called "encounter" between Gadamer and Derrida.⁴ Gadamer had always claimed that his hermeneutics had no other foundation than that of clarifying "the conditions in which understanding takes place," and it is in that sense only, and not as part of some metaphysical system, that "good will" should be taken. Gadamer is simply saying that speaking and listening (as representing all relations of same/other) involve the condition of opening oneself to the other. This said, the implication (and this is not pursued by Gadamer) is that one can also close oneself to new experience; one can refuse to be affected, to be put at risk, by new experience. While I think that Gadamer's hermeneutic sense of

freedom has advantages over such an existentialist understanding of freedom as that of the early Sartre, I think that something like Sartre's notion of "bad faith" is called for as a corollary to Gadamer's notion of "good will."

Sartre's early "phenomenological" approach to freedom drew on both Husserl and Heidegger. He writes in his *War Diaries*⁵ that he considered himself an avid Heideggerian just before and during the early years of the second world war, and relates how he, while incarcerated by the Germans, taught a course on *Being and Time* to some Catholic priests. Yet Sartre also deeply admired and drew heavily upon Husserl's work (as evident in the short but enthusiastic piece "Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology,"⁶ composed while Sartre was in Berlin in 1935–36 as well as his two books on imagination). These two towering influences, one (Heidegger) stressing situatedness, the other (Husserl) stressing the cogito, run side by side, in tension, in *Being and Nothingness*.⁷ When push comes to shove, in his defense of freedom he privileges Husserl because Sartre's understanding of freedom is inextricably bound to the notion of "distance." In fact, Sartre appropriates for this purpose the Husserlian idea of the "reduction," that aspect of Husserl's thought that, as we have seen, Gadamer finds so problematic. Our involvement in the world, for Sartre, can always be bracketed for evaluative purposes, since reality can only affect us through its meaning and we constitute that meaning. In the natural attitude, one attributes an autonomy of meaning to the world in relation to which one perceives oneself passive, whereas in the phenomenological attitude one steps back from the world in order to see it as the product of one's consciousness and to assume responsibility for the world. The capacity to bracket one's situation is, for Sartre, guaranteed by the structure of consciousness itself, which is that consciousness is positionally (thetically) aware of an object and simultaneously non-positionally (non-thetically) aware of itself. Sartre's ontology of consciousness claims that the non-positional self-awareness definitive of human consciousness on both prereflective and reflective levels is brought about by a "fission" within consciousness itself, a "rupture" in its identity. What divides consciousness from itself, producing self-consciousness, is *neant*, a principle of difference in the very heart of consciousness. *Neant* is "the nihilation by which we achieve a withdrawal in relation to the situation..." (*BN*, 437). *Neant* creates a self, for any notion of self, for Sartre the ontologist, implies an awareness of distantiation from otherness. One can be aware of existing as a self only as one differentiates oneself from what is other, and thus the distinction of subject from object, self from otherness, in Sartre's phenomenological ontology intrinsically marks human experience. *Neant* guarantees freedom for it holds all determination, as it were, at arm's length through its distantiating power, making all that appears to human consciousness subject to its constitution of meaning and value. "In anguish I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself" (*BN*, 40).

Determinism, for Sartre, posits a “continuity” between conscious act and the world that would allow the world to act upon consciousness in some causal way. For this reason, in defense of freedom, continuity must be severed:

If the given cannot explain the intention, it is necessary that the intention by its upsurge realize a rupture with the given, whatever this may be. Such must be the case, for otherwise we should have a present plenitude succeeding in continuity a present plenitude, and we could not prefigure the future. Moreover, this rupture is necessary for the appreciation of the given. The given, in fact, could never be a cause for an action if it were not appreciated [given a meaning by consciousness]. But this appreciation can be realized only by a withdrawal in relation to the given, a putting of the given into parentheses, which exactly supposes a break in continuity (*BN*, 478).

The result is an ontologically neat cleavage: “either man is wholly determined ... or else man is wholly free” (*BN*, 442). Clearly, Sartre’s phenomenological ontology of freedom, with its metaphors of distantiating, is insistent that in whatever situation one might be, there is always a choice: “No factual state whatever it may be (the political and economic structure of society, the psychological ‘state,’ etc.) is capable by itself of motivating any act whatsoever” (*BN*, 435). In his work subsequent to *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre came to see that there was more to be said about freedom, and that his phenomenological account was too abstract. He tells us in an interview, looking back at *Being and Nothingness*, that “*L’Etre et Le Neant* traced an interior experience without any coordination with the exterior experience of a petty-bourgeois intellectual.”⁸ In other words, reflection on lived experience must be accompanied by placing that reflection deeply and constitutively within an historical/social context. It is with this admission that Sartre’s thinking turns toward a richer sense of belonging and a more concrete (hermeneutical and Gadamerian) understanding of freedom. The significance and role of situatedness dominates Sartre’s later thinking on freedom to the point where, in *Search For a Method*,⁹ the one-way giving of meaning by the conscious subject in phenomenology gives way to a dialectical approach in which the historical/social world comes to affect, and even form, the subject. Note how differently the notion of surpassing is viewed:

What was once both a vague comprehension of our class, of our social conditioning by way of the family group, and a blind going-beyond, an awkward effort to wrench ourselves away from all this, at last ends up inscribed in us in the form of *character*. At this level are found the learned gestures (bourgeois gestures, socialist gestures) and the contradictory roles which compose us and which tear us apart (e.g., for Flaubert, the role of the dreamy pious child, and that of the future surgeon, the son of an atheistic surgeon). At this level also are the traces left by our first revolts, our desperate attempts to go beyond a stifling reality, and the resulting

deviations and distortions. To surpass all that is also to preserve it. We shall think *with* these gestures which we have learned and which we want to reject (*SM*, 101).

One thinks and acts by means of the “traces” inscribed in one through a situation that forms one and defines the very means whereby one would attempt to surpass one’s situation. The model of surpassing as creation *ex nihilo* (*The Transcendence of the Ego*¹⁰) gives way to the model of the “spirals”: “A life develops in spirals; it passes again and again by the same points but at different levels of integration and complexity” (*SM*, 64). The consequence for freedom is that “the most individual possible is only the interiorization and enrichment of a social possible” (*SM*, 95). The “dialectical” understanding of freedom in Sartre’s later works displays very much the features of the “hermeneutic” understanding of freedom. Both see a subjectivity that belongs to a historical/cultural situation to the point that the categories of its thinking and acting are always already formed through historical/cultural development. For Gadamer as well as Sartre, one’s prejudices (Gadamer) and one’s cultural presuppositions (Sartre) are not only always already there, but themselves are open to development in the course of experience. Sartre considers subjectivity to be a “totalization in process,” that is, a constant process of ongoing experience that attempts to maintain an integrity, by making sense of experience and meeting its needs. Experience “rolls along, like a snowball constantly increasing in size.”¹¹ Like Gadamer, Sartre stresses in his work on Flaubert how the openness of experience contains the ever renewed possibility of self-transformation in the encounter of sameness with alterity. While one could say that Sartre, in his later works, “caught up” with Gadamer’s hermeneutic understanding of freedom, one must also say that Sartre’s version of self-transformation adds a twist missing from (and called for in) Gadamer’s account when Sartre raises the issue of various processes of denial and forgetting through which the threat/disturbance provoked by alterity is deflected. For different reasons to be sure, subjects can attempt to hold onto their totalizations as if they were a finished totality. Sartre discusses several strategies in this regard, leading to his well known interpretation of the fainting on Flaubert’s part that successfully allowed him to withdraw from medical school. These processes of denial and forgetting are, of course, further developments of Sartre’s notion of “bad faith,” a centerpiece of his early work. Sartre, in appropriating Husserl’s work, viewed the natural attitude not as a simple epistemological error but as a denial of responsibility for the world and for oneself. Bad faith was always depicted as a flight behavior, a self-deception imposed on oneself because of an inability to cope with a difficult situation. In his early works, bad faith was seen to arise from the failure of subjectivity to realize the impossible goal of becoming a necessary being. In the later work, bad faith arises from the struggle of subjectivity to maintain interests of various sorts that are problematized and threatened by the new and the other.

Gadamer has a notion of “good will,” but not of “bad faith,” and yet, as we have seen, his hermeneutics calls for something like the latter. One is not, for Gadamer, automatically open to the other; one must be ready, disposed, sensitive in that regard. Recall his footnote warning the reader about the “danger of ‘appropriating’ the other person in one’s own understanding and thereby failing to recognize his or her otherness.” One can, in other words, close oneself off to the other, to all that might threaten one’s prejudices (categories of intelligibility, value, identity). Gadamer’s hermeneutics calls for something like Sartre’s bad faith, a thematizing of the processes whereby one “fails” to recognize otherness. What Gadamer refers to, very abstractly, as “failures” in openness to the other are concretely very often what Sartre refers to as strategies (denial, forgetting, self-deception) to maintain one’s present totalization. Becoming aware of these processes in turn demands both a recognition of, and careful attention to, methods of “working through,” and rigorous investigation into the various interests at stake that promote bad faith behavior. (These interests need in no way be tied to a metaphysics and can have multiple motivations.) In this way Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy of freedom, which began with an appreciation of situatedness that Sartre came to grasp only in his later work, can itself learn from Sartre’s existentialism the lesson of existence as desire and interest.

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Notes

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 9.
2. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 61. Hereafter *PH*.
3. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), 304. Hereafter *TM*.
4. See Richard E. Palmer and Diane Michelfelder, eds. *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre*, trans. Quintan Hoare (New York: Pantheon, 1984).
6. Sartre, “Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology,” trans. Joseph Fell, in *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* (May, 1970), 4–5.

7. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956). Hereafter *BN*.
8. Sartre, "The Itinerary of a Thought" in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Mathews (New York: William Morrow, 1974), 35.
9. Sartre, *Search For a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Random House, 1968). Hereafter *SM*.
10. "Thus each instant of our conscious life is a creation *ex nihilo*." (Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick [New York: Noonday, 1957], 98–9.)
11. Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. 2, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4.